CHAPTER 3

“To Be Patriotic is to Build Socialism”: Communist Ideology in Vietnam’s Civil War

Tuong Vu, University of Oregon

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was the instigator and victor in the Vietnamese civil war (1959–1975). It was led by a communist party (the Vietnamese Workers’ Party, or VWP) that had displayed a particularly sharp binary worldview since at least the 1940s. To communist leaders, the world was divided into two opposing camps. The socialist camp was imagined as a paradise in which peace, happiness, and goodwill ruled. In contrast, the capitalist or imperialist camp symbolized everything that was bad, including war, suffering, and exploitation. The interests of the two camps were fundamentally opposed and a war of mutual destruction between them was inevitable. Yet, because history was viewed as following a linear progressive path and the socialist camp represented progress, this camp was expected to triumph in such a war.

This binary worldview of Vietnamese communists was remarkably consistent throughout the 1940s. As reality did not conform to what was imagined, it was modified but never abandoned. Regardless of what happened, communist leaders enthusiastically identified themselves with the revolutionary camp. In the darkest moments, when no support from this camp was forthcoming, they did not cease associating themselves mentally with the Soviet Union, imagining about it, and displaying their admiration for it. Their loyalty explains why, when the Cold War arrived in Asia in the late 1940s, DRV leaders volunteered to fight it on the front line for the socialist
camp, disregarding the looming threat of American intervention. Their earnest appeals and Mao's personal pleading helped persuade an uninterested Soviet Union to recognize the DRV in early 1950, extending the battle line of the Cold War into Indochina.

The question is, what happened to this ideological loyalty during the subsequent civil war between North and South Vietnam? The war was framed from the communist side as "the resistance against America to save the country" (khang chien chong My cuu nuoc), making it sound as if it were simply a war for national liberation and unification between the independent-minded Vietnamese and American invaders. The standard version in the literature depicts a fierce Vietnamese desire for national unification and independence that ran opposed to American determination to stop communism from expanding into Southeast Asia. Vietnamese communists are viewed as being driven by deep patriotic sentiments as descendants of a people who had repeatedly fought off foreign invasions in history. The alliance with the Soviet camp is seen as existing only for political expediency. Even when VWP leaders' strong adherence to communism is acknowledged, it is often argued that they placed national liberation and unification above ideological goals. Alternatively, when ideology is discussed, this is often done in the context of factional conflict. Ideological conflicts in this line of analysis merely reflected power struggle.

Based on newly available documents and other primary sources, this chapter comes to the opposite conclusion that Vietnamese communists never wavered in their ideological loyalty during the period when key decisions about the civil war were made (1953–1960). They accepted Soviet and Chinese advice to sign the Geneva Agreements but continued to perpetuate their propaganda war against the United States. Under various pennames, Ho Chi Minh published sharp commentaries in Vietnamese newspapers, viciously attacking American policy and its capitalist culture and society. Although North Vietnamese leaders expected elections to be held in 1956, they pressed on with rural class struggle and their goal to build a "people's democracy." They did not shy away from defending communism when the Saigon regime attacked the doctrine and they never abandoned their binary worldview despite serious disputes within the Soviet bloc in the late 1950s. The VWP was not of one mind on the question of how to cope with discord within the bloc, but its leadership worked hard to preserve bloc unity. As it launched an armed struggle in South Vietnam, the Party did not downplay socialism but in fact boldly promoted it with the new formulation "To be patriotic is to build socialism." Party leaders sometimes spoke openly about wanting to build socialism in South Vietnam once the North won the civil war. The evidence suggests that a modernizing socialist ideology rather than